

Message Text

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SUBJ: PEREZ COMMENTS ON PANAMA CANAL

1. PRESIDENT CARLOS ANDRES PEREZ GAVE A PRESS CONFERENCE APRIL 23 FOR FOREIGN JOURNALISTS ATTENDING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS SEMINAR ORGANIZED BY USIS AND THE GOV'S CENTRAL OFFICE OF INFORMATION AT WHICH HE SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT THE PANAMA CANAL. REPLYING TO A QUESTION FROM TIME INC. VICE-PRESIDENT BARRY ZORTHIAN CONCERNING THE CANAL HAVING BEEN CONVERTED INTO AN ELECTORAL ISSUE BY RONALD REAGAN, PRESIDENT PEREZ SAID THAT IF THE ISSUE CONTINUED TO BE INTRODUCED INTO THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, "IT WOULD IN NOW WAY BENEFIT THE FUTURE OF THE HEMISPHERE." HE WARNED AGAINST TREATING AS A POLITICAL FOOTBALL A THEME OF SUCH IMPORTANCE BOTH TO LATIN AMERICA AND TO THE US.

2. PRESIDENT PEREZ ALSO SAID, "WE ARE IN THE BICENTENNIAL YEAR OF A GREAT NATION, WHICH WAS THE FIRST TO FIGHT AGAINST COLONIALISM IS THIS HEMISPHERE THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE PANAMA CANAL TODAY CONSTITUTES A COLONIAL ENCLAVE IN THE HEART OF AMERICA, AND THE UNITED STATES IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS SITUATION. I MUST ALSO ADD AN HISTORICAL FACT. WE CANNOT FORGET THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THIS BARELY DISGUISED ANNEXATION OF THE PANAMA CANAL ZONE TOOK PLACE. BUT AT A TIME WHEN

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THE US. HAS ASSUMED THE LEADERSHIP OF THE DEMOCRATIC WORLD

AND RAISES THE STANDARD OF FREEDOM AND ANTICOLONIALISM, IT IS INCONGRUENT AND HIGHLY DANGEROUS AND DAMAGING FOR THE IMAGE OF THE US. FOR IT TO INSIST ON PERPETUATING A MISTAKE AND FOR IT TO MAINTAIN A LATIN AMERICAN NATION SUBJECT TO THE PERMANENT HUMILIATION OF HAVING PART OF ITS TERRITORY UNDER US. SOVEREIGNTY."

3. PEREZ WENT ON TO SAY, "THIS SITUATION IS PLAINLY INSUPPORTABLE AND INTOLERABLE. WE CANNOT TALK OF HISTORICAL RIGHTS OR ANYTHING ELSE. THIS CASE FOR PANAMA IS KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. HOWEVER, IT WOULD BE AN EXTREMIST ATTITUDE TO EXPECT THE UNITED STATES TO WITHDRAW IMMEDIATELY FROM THE PANAMA CANAL ZONE. IT IS STRATEGIC AND EXTRAORDINARILY IMPORTANT MEANS OF COMMUNICATION FOR THE WORLD. THE GOVERNMENT OF PANAMA HAS NEVER DENIED THE NEED OF MAINTAINING THE CANAL'S SECURITY. WHAT PANAMA ASKS CANNOT BE DENIED WITHOUT OFFENDING THE SAME DEMOCRATIC SENTIMENTS ESPOUSED BY THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. PANAMA SIMPLY WANTS FULL SOVEREIGNTY OVER ITS ENTIRE TERRITORY, AFTER WHICH, ON A BASIS OF SOVEREIGN EQUALITY, A PANAMA CANAL TREATY CAN BE NEGOTIATED."

4. PEREZ TOLD THE JOURNALISTS THAT THE GOV HAD OFFICIALLY ADVISED THE USG THAT "IF THE CANAL ISSUE IS NOT SETTLED WITHIN A RELATIVELY SHORT TIME, GREAT DIFFICULTIES WILL ARISE IN THE RELATIONS OF THE TWO AMERICAS." PEREZ WARNED THAT THE US. WOULD BE HARMED BY A "DECREASE IN ITS MORAL AUTHORITY AND PRESTIGE."

5. ASKED ABOUT THE SECRETARY'S RECENT STATEMENT TO THE EFFECT THAT THE US. IS PREPARED TO DEFEND THE CANAL ZONE AGAINST ALL LATIN AMERICA IF NECESSARY, PEREZ RESPONDED THAT THE ISSUE SHOULD NOT BE DISCUSSED IN "BELLICOSE TERMS." HE WENT ON TO SAY, "TODAY, WE DO NOT FEAR THREATS OF ARMED AGGRESSION BY THE GREAT POWERS. IN THE MULTIPOLAR WORLD OF TODAY, THE LOSS OF MORAL AUTHORITY BY A GREAT POWER CAN HAVE THE MOST SERIOUS EFFECT. WHAT HAS HAPPENED LATELY IN AFRICA AND ASIA IS THE RESULT OF SEVERAL CENTURIES OF EXPLOITATION AND SLAVERY OF THESE COUNTRIES BY THE WEST. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND THE US. MIGHT BE CLOSELY RELATED TO THE TREATMENT GIVEN ULTIMATELY TO THE UNCLASSIFIED

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SOLUTION OF THE PANAMA CANAL PROBLEM."
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